

SECRETARIATS at IDRC

IDRC



INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTER

Secretariats at IDRC

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Introduction

IDRC, Canada's International Development Research Centre, has always sought to develop collaborative arrangements with a broad range of development partners. Collaboration encourages coordination, which reduces duplication and increases the likelihood that development projects will achieve their objectives. It allows IDRC and other donors to experiment with innovative approaches to development issues and to achieve improved synergy from their efforts. As well, collaboration is a practical necessity. Acting alone, development organizations cannot always attain the scale necessary to accomplish their goals. For these reasons, IDRC has introduced the concept of secretariats.

By supporting and hosting secretariats in collaboration with a range of other donors, IDRC has been able to focus development resources on topics of international importance. These collaborative undertakings have demonstrated their effectiveness over the last decade and now form a regular part of IDRC's mode of program delivery. Secretariats allow groups of donors to pool their financial resources while retaining direct input into program priorities and directions. This brochure answers some common questions about secretariats, such as

how they work and what benefits are derived from the secretariat approach to development assistance.

What is a secretariat?

A secretariat is an initiative that is housed either at IDRC headquarters in Ottawa or in one of IDRC's seven regional offices. Secretariats pool the resources and expertise of various development organizations that share a common goal in program delivery. IDRC provides a range of support services that are critical to the success of the secretariat. Although legally part of IDRC, the Centre does not control the program work of the secretariat. Each secretariat has its own executive director and is governed and funded as a collaborative partnership amongst a group of donors. Secretariats are created to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct research into problems of the developing world and into the means for applying and adapting knowledge to foster sustainable economic and social advancement. Secretariats can also be established to build capacity in partner institutions and to provide direct assistance for research and development activities within their areas of specialization. The donor partners, as members of the steering committee, have direct involvement in determining the program directions and priorities of the secretariat.

Why is a secretariat useful?

Secretariats have proven to be an effective way to focus resources and expertise while providing leadership and international credibility in the pursuit of the shared development objectives of a group of donors. These factors create conditions that are conducive to innovation in problem solving and help produce a reach and impact that is often beyond what a single development organization might achieve. IDRC has hosted more than 15 secretariats and has found that they encourage coordination and a multidisciplinary approach to problem solving. Secretariats have also proven to be a very effective way to include developing-country perspectives in decisions about program directions and implementation.

What does a secretariat include?

A secretariat is headed by an executive director who is responsible for providing both program leadership and overall management to the secretariat and its staff. In addition, each secretariat has a steering committee that is responsible for guiding, monitoring, and assessing program performance. This committee includes representatives of the donor partners and, often, developing-country experts. In many cases, secretariats also include an advisory group made up of appropriate experts who provide specialized knowledge and input into program matters.

What is the legal status of a secretariat?

A secretariat is legally part of IDRC — it is not a separate legal entity. It receives support from IDRC to meet its financial, administrative, personnel, and legal needs. This base of support from IDRC provides security and stability to the secretariat. However, it does not exclude the possibility that the secretariat could evolve into a separate entity in the future, if the steering committee views that as desirable.

How is a secretariat created?

Because the secretariat is legally part of IDRC, its establishment is subject to approval by the Centre's Board of Governors. To obtain approval, a secretariat proposal must be developed and presented to the Board. The proposal must present a sound and intellectually rigorous argument for the creation of the secretariat, addressing the focus, program plans, resource requirements, and the relationships that the secretariat will develop.

What are the required elements in a secretariat proposal?

Each proposal for a secretariat must explain how the idea for the secretariat arose, the specific mission and program goals of the secretariat, the essence of the program of work over the first few years of the secretariat, the risks that are anticipated, and the expected life-cycle during which the secretariat will achieve its goals. The proposal must explain

the rationale for the secretariat, the problem that is to be addressed, and the proposed benefits and to whom they will accrue. The proposal should also suggest the anticipated outcomes and the methods that will be used to measure and evaluate program achievements.

The financial and human resource needs must also be clearly articulated. Financial aspects of the proposal must address the projected costs and program expenditures, the formal and anticipated commitment of funding from all donors, and plans for additional funding through either nonpartner funding or the sale of technologies. The human resource needs and availability of qualified staff must also be addressed along with any unusual demands that might be placed on the financial and administrative support available from IDRC. Finally, it is important that the proposal indicate to the IDRC Board of Governors how the work of the proposed secretariat will complement or support the program objectives of IDRC and the other involved institutions and why there are advantages to housing the secretariat at IDRC.

What is the role of the executive director?

As the head of the secretariat, the executive director is both responsible and accountable to the steering committee and to IDRC for providing program leadership and management of the secretariat. The executive director is accountable to the steering committee for the

implementation of the program activities of the secretariat and for the development of program-related policies. The responsibility of the executive director to IDRC covers the management of the secretariat in nonprogram areas, including compliance with IDRC's financial, administrative, personnel, and legal policies.

What is the role of the steering committee?

The steering committee, which includes donor representatives and, in many cases, developing-country experts, oversees all program matters related to the secretariat. As such, the committee approves the secretariat's program of work and budget, reviews program policies, strategies, and priorities, assesses the performance of the secretariat against established benchmarks, and recommends, supervises, and assesses the performance of the executive director. The steering committee also establishes the parameters of the executive director's authority to solicit funds and conclude funding agreements with other donors.

Who are the members of the steering committee?

Secretariats are multidonor initiatives, and donors participate in their funding and governance. Usually, the first members of the steering committee are donors. However, nondonors may be invited to be members on the steering committee. If the steering committee does not include significant nondonor involvement, it is encouraged

to establish an advisory group composed of technical experts primarily from developing countries.

What is the role of the advisory group?

Many secretariats have an advisory group that brings to the secretariat access to special skills and insights. This group is normally composed of specialists from specific disciplines, and especially from developing countries. The advisory group ensures that the secretariat has a broad, comprehensive view of program issues and that developing-country priorities and perspectives are considered in the planning and execution of the program work of the secretariat.

What is the role of IDRC?

Because secretariats are legally part of IDRC, the President of IDRC is obligated to ensure that sound financial and administrative management occurs within all secretariats. The President of IDRC is also responsible to the Centre's Board of Governors for reporting on all secretariats and is accountable for the positions that IDRC takes as a member of the steering committee. However, accountability for program direction and monitoring is shared amongst all members of the steering committee. The executive director is required to present to the IDRC Board an annual report that relates the work of the secretariat to the program of work proposed when the secretariat was approved.

IDRC assumes accountability to both individual donors and the steering committee in nonprogram matters. IDRC signs all funding agreements on behalf of the secretariat and is therefore accountable for all funds expended. However, program decisions are the responsibility of the steering committee and executive director. IDRC is also responsible to the steering committee for ensuring that all legal, financial, and administrative rules are followed, for providing timely and accurate financial reports, and for reporting management deficiencies that might hamper program performance.

How is program performance evaluated?

In addition to specific evaluations carried out by the secretariat itself, regular performance reviews are undertaken to evaluate the performance of the secretariat and its programs. These reviews allow the executive director and the steering committee to determine what benefits have been achieved by using the secretariat mechanism. IDRC has adopted a framework for performance review that examines the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and financial viability of the secretariats it hosts. These evaluations are designed to address the performance expectations of all donors. The evaluation framework, which is developed by IDRC in association with the steering committee, also considers the structure and mode of operation, stage of

maturity, and the level of risk associated with each secretariat.

How is good financial management ensured?

As a custodian of both Canadian public funds and those entrusted to it by other donors, IDRC audits compliance with applicable financial, legal, and administrative policies as well as achievement of appropriate results with the resources made available. IDRC is accountable to all donors for ensuring that all secretariats adhere to sound policies and practices. IDRC is committed to ensuring that efficient and effective management systems and practices are in place, that there is complete and accurate reporting of secretariat activities to the steering committee, and that there are regular independent assessments of program results against recognized objectives.

Who controls human resources?

The executive director can either be an employee of IDRC or be seconded to IDRC by another organization. The executive director, although hired by IDRC, is nominated to the position by the steering committee. Other staff of the secretariat are also employees of IDRC. The IDRC classification and pay scales are usually broad enough to cover all staffing needs and to allow the secretariat to attract qualified staff in the international marketplace, although exceptions will be considered. IDRC may also hire non-Canadians for program jobs without first testing the domestic

market. This provides the secretariat with the advantage of being able to hire the best person for the job irrespective of their nationality.

Why does IDRC charge an administrative fee?

IDRC charges a moderate administrative fee on the funds it receives from other donors. This fee recovers the incremental costs associated with providing a broad range of services to secretariats. In return for this fee, IDRC assumes responsibility for the basic financial, administrative, human resource, and legal services needed by the secretariats.

If a secretariat requires additional services that are not normally provided by IDRC's administrative units, such as those associated with external legal consultations or the use of recruitment agencies, the costs for these services must be borne by the secretariat. Some other services, such as those available through the Centre's Library, its Partnership and Business Development Office, and its Evaluation Unit, may be charged on a fee-for-service basis. This charge is negotiated between the unit providing the service and the secretariat.

Need more information?

If you have additional questions or require information beyond what is covered in this brochure, please contact the IDRC office nearest you or visit one of IDRC's websites, listed on the following pages.

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